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PORTRAIT OF HIS WIFE. BY ANDREA DEL SARTO
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Artists' Wives

BY RICHARDSON WRIGHT

This is a common belief that artists' love affairs are one thing, their wives another. The ordinary mortal has a notion that because a man is gifted with a rare creative talent such as painting or sculpturing, he cannot possibly possess others; that, consequently, artists are poor business men, and—this concerns us most—make notoriously bad husbands. The onus is thus put on the artist. Cursed with a vague and romantic malady called "temperament," he is held irresponsible, unfaithful, and generally everything that a nice married man shouldn't be.

I purpose to show that this is all wrong; that, although artists as a class are detached from realities, they make the best sort of husbands; that hosts of them have been happily married; and that, knowing a thing of beauty to be a joy forever, nothing gave them greater pleasure than the preserving for posterity of the likenesses of their wives.

In any successful marriage the qualities of one party complement the qualities of the other. Happy marriages are not a drama in which protagonists and antagonists keep life at a fever-pitch of crises, but rather a comedy of manners in which playfellows exchange the masks of tears and laughter and the curtains of life bring satisfactory endings. On this basis the ideal artist's wife would be a common-

place sort of body, one with her feet on the earth and her head not too much in the stars, one possessed of a saving grace of humor, a few domestic traits, and the discrimination to appraise merit. She should not take life nor her husband too seriously, and she should exercise fortitude and resourcefulness in grasping unexpected changes of fortune. The perfect artist's household, in short, cannot contain two geniuses of like nature; one must bear the palette, the other the distaff. That, I say, is ideal. The actuality does not always measure up to such a standard. The wives of artists from the ancient times to the present fall into two general categories—the decorative and the utilitarian. The decorative wife may serve excellently as a model, but it is also possible for her to be too beautiful or too precious, or too picturesque. She may prove a constant inspiration to her husband and yet lack the gift of stimulating criticism so necessary to his work. For it is one thing to be beauty, another to help create it.

Among the dangerously beautiful, extravagant and ill-tempered we find Lucretia del Fede for whom Andrea del Sarto slaved and whom he painted innumerable times. Poor Andrea was in the position of the man who possesses a jewel of great price that constantly is being stolen. Lucretia knew her value



Royal Gallery, Vienna
SELF-PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AND HIS WIFE. BY
HANS BURGKMAIR

to him, knew that he was wholly absorbed in her, and so made for herself an encarnined career—loved indiscriminately, drove him to dishonest practices to gratify her extravagant tastes, deserted him on his deathbed—and then had the irony to survive him forty years, doubtless full, romantic and spicy years. For her life was no brief candle. Had she lived today, doubtless she would have figured in the Sunday supplements; as it is, she looks out smiling and benign from the *Madonna della Arpie* and from almost every Virgin and saint Andrea painted.

Daniel Gabriel Rossetti's wife, on the other hand, was of the precious type, one who would "die of a rose in aromatic pain." Fragile from the first, Miss Siddall enriched Rossetti's art in many a canvas and is immortalized in that mystic epigram, *Beatra Beatrix*. She served another purpose—she set a fashion for strange coiffures, flowing draperies, dreamy poses and the langour of ill-health from which a certain class of English women did not entirely recover

until suffrage and the war roused them to a sterner conception of womanhood.

Of the picturesque type—although she was, probably, aware of her tragic picturesqueness—was Rembrandt's second choice. You will recall how Saskia van Uylenborch served him faithfully as wife, kept a good home, bore him his idol Titus, and posed for many pictures, including *The Betrothed Jewess* and the *Flora* and *Artemisia*, growing plumper and more stodgy with each sitting. Then, at the early age of twenty-nine, she died. A perfectly nice, heavy, hearthside companion was Saskia, the utilitarian type that sets a good table, keeps the household accounts and spares her master domestic worries so that all his attention can be devoted to his art. After her death his private affairs fell very much into disarray. Then up from the scullery came the peasant girl Hendreskje Stoffels. She made every effort to fill Saskia's shoes—looked after Titus, sat up nights vainly trying to make the household accounts balance, bore him a daughter,



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S WIFE. BY PAOLO VERONESE



Brussels Museum

THE ARTIST AND HIS FAMILY
BY CORNELIS DE VOS



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AND HIS WIFE. BY ANDREA DEL SARTO

Pitti Gallery

suffered ecclesiastical and social ostracism, and generally acted in that tragic but none-the-less picturesque fashion that women do who, seeking the *salon*, sacrifice the kitchen.

Besides possessing domestic gifts, the utilitarian wife must have one more trait—nay, two. She must be able to feed her husband's spirit with that measure of compliment and encouragement so necessary to keep the creative fires aglow, and she must suffer his idiosyncrasies. The last is almost as important as the first. William and Catherine Blake are the ideal example of this type. Marrying him at twenty-four, she tended him forty long years—childless, poverty stricken, solitary years. She was, to quote Tatham's quaint words, "the buttress of his hopes, the stay to his thoughts, the companion of his solitude and the solace of his days." On his deathbed

Blake began to draw her portrait; there is no record of its having been finished.

Equally happy was Rubens with the beautiful Isabel Brandt; and Van Dyck, after having gone the rake's progress, with Maria Ruthven, whom King Charles is said to have chosen for him. Hogarth, on the other hand, did not emulate his *Rake's Progress*, but marrying the daughter of Sir James Thornhill in spite of the baronet's protest—Thornhill held him to be an inferior artist—proved an excellent husband. Franz Hals—we are choosing indiscriminately—made two women happy; Annelke Hermes and then Lysbeth Regnier. He had five children. In Chiara Fancelli the artist Perugino found his ideal. They must have had a happy time together, for Vasari tells us that he was so fascinated with his wife's hair that he used to design her head-dresses—a practice some



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AND HIS WIFE. BY JEAN CLOUET

Uffizi Gallery

of our modern artists might well follow.

Margaret Frey so fascinated Albrecht Dürer that he delighted himself and posterity by putting her in many engravings. Quentin Matsys was a prodigious father. His first wife bore him six children; his second, seven—all sons. Thirteen children—one wonders what became of them all! And then Gainsborough—for the list is interminable and we must finish here—was painting one day in the woods when a beautiful creature slipped through the trees like a sylph. Margaret Burr. They married, and their life was as idyllic as their meeting.

There is, of course, the reverse of the picture. Elizabeth Schmidt, for instance, who finally got on Holbein's nerves—or he on her's—and he left her, and Jeanne Pennet, who led Prudhon much the same merry chase as Lucretia led Andrea del Sarto. But in the main, artists have

lived happily with their wives, literary ghouls to the contrary. Legend has about the artist's life an atmosphere of romance. To the lay mind it is something esoteric, exotic. For a matter of fact, the artist's life is quite usual, his married life, more often than not, quite commonplace. If one questions this, let him look to those artists who never married. The reasons why some grocers and clerks and carpenters do not marry are precisely the same. Genius is hard to live with. That may be one stumbling block. Some imagine that art can never be entirely chaste. That may be another. But look you, romancers, upon the story of Raphael. Into his life there came one Magherita—La Bella Fornina, as she was known, daughter of a baker. Now Raphael was a favorite at court and popular at the Vatican. It was fitting that the Cardinal Divizio should choose Raphael as the husband for his niece,



THE ARTIST AND HIS FAMILY. BY ANTONIO BASSANO

Uffizi Gallery

Maria Bibliena. Raphael allowed himself to become enmeshed. Meanwhile Magherita was serving as model for the *Donna Velata*, the *Sistine Madonna* and innumerable other pictures. When the Cardinal's niece faced him with the rumor of his irregular attachment, Raphael terminated the engagement. A year later, it is said, she died of a broken heart. Then there was Watteau. Here was one who painted the most exquisite women of modern times—and painted them exquisitely—and yet Watteau was mortally afraid of them. He never married. In youth Turner experienced an unfortunate love affair, was jilted and never married. There was nothing unusual about that. And for all his platonic friendship, Michaelangelo remained single for the very same reason that the business man gives who is wedded to his business. When a friend rebuked him for not marrying and having children, he replied, "I have a wife too many already, namely this art, which harries me inces-

santly, and my works are my children, and they will live awhile, however valueless. Woe to Lorenzo di Bartoluccio Ghiberti if he had not made the doors of San Giovanni, for his children and nephews have sold and destroyed everything he did, whereas they stand."

It is silly to expect all artists capable of a great love just because they are artists, as it is to expect all women to be good cooks and excellent mothers because they are women. The vast majority of marriages remind us—artists' marriages being no exception—that the faculty for a great love is a gift of the gods—and the gods are not prodigal. Neither are they respecters of persons. The arts receive their share along with the crafts and commerce. How then can we say—and I have promised to explain it—that artists make good husbands and that their wives, in the main, have a happy time?

The basis of any art is discrimination, selection. Most of us ordinary folk take life as it comes to us; the artist picks and



THE ARTIST'S FAMILY. BY JUAN MAZO MARTINEZ

Royal Gallery, Vienna

chooses his way. Many of us do not know happiness when it stares us in the face, nor appreciate peace and contentment and romance. But out of the few resources of life, out of its commonplace, everyday affairs, the artist chooses those that compose well in the picture of a

pleasant life. He has a faculty for creating his own romances.

The artist takes life *a la carte*. That's why he is so interesting a person for even a commonplace woman to live with. The majority of us take life *table d'hôte*. That's why we are not artists.

